

Initiatives in Action: Youth Success Initiative



We can do more together.

Growing up Guided

When Nigel was just 5 years old, his single mother knew her son needed a strong male role model to help him be successful in school and in life. She connected with Denver Kids, hoping a male mentor could help Nigel in school and put him on track to graduate.

Nigel and his new mentor, Mark, began “hanging out.” They spent time going to the Denver Children’s Museum, fishing, and going to ballgames. It was a great match, and Nigel responded to Mark’s influence by excelling in school.

Now, nearly 10 years later, Nigel is still “hanging out” with Mark. These days their activities include snowboarding and homework help. With the goal of graduating from high school firmly in hand, they spend a lot of time preparing Nigel for college.

Denver Kids is now a partner agency of the Youth Mentoring Collaborative, which is supported by Mile High United Way, the Denver Office of Strategic Partnerships and Bank of the West. The Youth Mentoring Collaborative is comprised of 15 mentoring organizations that work together to recruit mentors and implement best practices. Their goal is to ensure that every at-risk youth in metro Denver in need of a volunteer mentor is matched with one.

Mile High United Way’s support of the Youth Mentoring Collaborative is a fundamental part of its Youth Success Initiative, which seeks to empower at-risk youth to overcome obstacles and graduate from high school. Quality mentoring programs, like Denver Kids, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Colorado, and the other member organizations of the Youth Mentoring Collaborative, have proven over and over again that they are an effective strategy for helping youth succeed in school and in life.

Having a mentor has given Nigel self confidence and a bright outlook on life.

“I’ve tried to expose him to a variety of experiences; he’s one of those kids who wants to explore everything,” said Mark. “It’s my job as a mentor to show him the doors and windows of opportunity that are out there, but ultimately he has to walk through.”

Nigel is a sophomore at Denver School for the Arts, an academically challenging public school that focuses on the arts. His concentration is in stage craft, design and the technical aspects of a theater production.



Mark and Nigel spend time together every Monday afternoon.

“I love the whole process,” said Nigel. “We get to create something, go through all the crazy rehearsals, and see it in action during the run of a production. It’s a little taste of everything from drafting to sketching, set design and lighting.”

Nigel and Mark get together every Monday for four hours, and the occasional weekend. A lot of time is spent on homework, especially with college looming. Getting in the habit of seeing each other every week is important.

“...if Mark wasn’t in my life, I probably wouldn’t have picked the right friends, and that could have led to something else...could have affected my education, and so on. I’m very grateful.”

“I wanted him to know he could count on someone, that I would be there to pick him up from school at the same time every week, and we’d have our time together for homework or fun activities,” said Mark.

At school, Nigel is taking an advanced placement history class. He admits that it’s his most challenging subject, but Mark helps him work through the strug-

gles until he understands the concepts. A few weeks ago they spent hours figuring out the logistics of the Boston Tea Party. It turns out there was a debate on the subject the next day in class; he understood the concepts so well that he won.

Mark is a father figure and big brother to Nigel. In the last three years, they have been working on some important life lessons.

“It’s important for me to show him there is a process in solving problems in school and in life. Thinking logically and always learning from situations are core things I’ve shown him,” Mark said.

Nigel takes those lessons home. “If my mom and I get in a disagreement, instead of screaming at each other, we work out a plan and compromise. I learned this from Mark.”

Mark and Nigel’s relationship constantly evolves.

“I don’t know where I would be without Mark as my mentor. I know I wouldn’t have experienced half of what I have in life already. It would be a ripple effect: if Mark wasn’t in my life, I probably wouldn’t have picked the right friends, and that could have led to something else...could have affected my education, and so on. I’m very grateful,” said Nigel.

For more information about our Youth Success Initiative, please visit our website at www.unitedwaydenver.org.

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Mile High United Way